The Fourth Church Pulpit

THE IMPERATIVE OF LOVE

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Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore we are saved by love.

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Scripture
John 15:1-11
I Corinthians 13:1-3

**"... if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but do not have love,I am nothing."**
I Corinthians 13:2 [NRSV]

In one of the best television commercials of the season, three men are sitting on a boat dock fishing, a father and two adult sons. One of the sons slides closer to the older man who looks at him quizzically and says something like "What is it, Johnny?" And Johnny, his voice choking with emotion, says "You're my Dad, and I love you man." To which the father responds, "You're not getting my Bud Light Johnny."

It's a good commercial not only because it is clever and just silly enough to be funny. It is also a little poignant. It reminds some of us that of all the things adult men say to one another, "I love you" isn't ordinarily one of them. It reminds some of us that we never said "I love you" to our fathers ... or maybe our mothers. It reminds some of love, known primarily by its absence, by emptiness and longing. It approaches and knocks on the door of a very powerful topic and then it backs quickly away, and we laugh as much in relief as anything else, I suppose.

"If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," a man wrote two thousand years ago.

In one of the journals I consult regularly, I read this past week an excerpt from a book published after the Second World War, *Burma Diary*, the daily reflections of a GI in 1943. Thinking about what soldiers think about during war, namely the very real possibility that life might come to an immediate and violent end, he wrote:

> "What I mean is that God will keep us from the ultimate evil. That ultimate evil is not death. If I were hit by a shell or bomb they who love me must not think of it as God's failure to keep me. To be kept by God means to be in God's love whether living or dying. The ultimate evil would be the absence of love." [See *Daybook*, March 11, 1996]

If I do not have love, I gain nothing; I am nothing. The man who wrote those words was addressing a small group of people in the Greek city of Corinth around the year 55 A.D. The people were new Christians. There weren't very many of them at that point, but they had begun to use the word "Christian" and they had come to use a new word to describe what they were together — *ecclesia* — church.

What prompted the beautiful soliloquy on love which Paul included in a letter he wrote to them was the simple fact that they were arguing and the argument had become so bitter that everyone was choosing up sides. Each faction had its own version of the truth, the true faith. Each faction was convinced the others were wrong. Here they were, a tiny little group of mostly poor people in a major seaport city, a bustling commercial center with a thriving market place, a theater, a synagogue and with a huge temple to Aphrodite just outside of town which employed 1,000 sacred prostitutes. Here they were, living in the midst of all of that and instead of making careful plans about how to be faithful, how to say a good word about Jesus in a way that had a chance of being heard, how to survive ... instead they were expending all their energy fighting and it seemed like the fragile, little church would fly apart.

That's the situation to which Paul writes. And in the process of addressing their mundane internal conflicts, he penned some of the most sublime words ever written about religion and faith.

> "The message of the cross is foolishness."
>
> "Where is the wise?"
>
> "Jews demand signs, and Greeks desire wisdom but we proclaim Christ crucified."

"God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Human religion always comes up with a powerful, mighty God, in control of history, a logical God accessible to human reason. The gods of the Greeks were remote, uncaring, unfeeling. The Greeks had a word for God: "*apatheia*" — perfect, needing nothing, feeling nothing, wanting nothing.

And that's fine until the bottom falls out, until a deranged man kills 16 children and even the most devout cannot suppress the lament: "Why, O God?" or "If there is a powerful God, why do things like this happen?" The only response to human tragedy and suffering is a God who becomes vulnerable and who knows the limitations of humanity, a God who ends up on a cross.

"Only a suffering God can help," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Nazi prison cell when he knew he would be executed.

"God's weakness is stronger than human strength," St. Paul wrote.

And then, focusing on their petty divisions, Paul used the love of God in Jesus Christ, expressed primarily in the crucifixion, as a model for living the life of faith which was, for him, the true human life.

"I will show you a still more excellent way," he wrote.

Paul used an unusual word — not the word for romantic love or family love but a selfless love, a love that gives away life itself, the love of God. The word was *agape*. And the more he wrote about it, the more eloquent he became, and in the process he thoroughly redefined what it means to have faith, to be a religious person.

The Corinthian people, by the way, already knew what it meant to be religious. If you were Jewish, and many of the Corinth Christians were, faith meant obeying the religious law, dietary restrictions, sabbath observances. For the Greeks, the gentiles, faith was knowing the truth, understanding big concepts like the good, the beautiful, having a rational, logical system of beliefs, a comfortable personal theology. Paul's answer challenged both of those traditions. True faith, Paul said, begins at the cross. It begins with a love so complete, so absolute, that it will give up life itse.

And then Paul went on, warming to his topic. Faith expresses itself in love. Without that, without love, all the accoutrements of religion didn't mean a thing. Now some Corinthians were so enthusiastic and devout, so spiritual, they were overcome in worship and behaved in a peculiar way; "speaking in tongues" they called it, a clear manifestation that the spirit of God was in them, they said. But if you don't love, Paul said, you sound like an out-of-tune musical instrument, or a brash, obnoxious cymbal.

Some could prophecy, speak for God, preach clearly and compellingly, and their expertise, they said, showed that God was in them. If you don't love, Paul said, all your preaching and prophesying is empty. Others were experts in public generosity; still others were so fervent they were willing to be publicly abused and persecuted. Maybe they even went out looking for trouble in order to earn religious merit for the courage. Without love, Paul said, all of that, all that religion, isn't worth the proverbial hill of beans.

It is the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. True religion is expressed in a life of love. If it does not result in love, it isn't true religion. Furthermore, this absolute commitment to the imperatives of love is not just another religious rule. It is the way to live truly. Jesus had said that:

> "What will it profit if a person gains the whole world and forfeits his/her life? The one who gives life away, loses life, will find true life."

That basic Christian affirmation, that true life is lived when it is literally given away in love, was a counter-culture message in first century Corinth.

Giving life away for love is still a counter-culture message, still a little foolish by the standards of a culture that assures me over and over that full, happy, meaningful life will be mine to the degree that I accumulate all the right

stuff: fashionable clothes, jewelry, the right Scotch, wrist watch, shoes, automobile to define with absolute certainty my place in relation to other people and to guarantee the meaning and significance of my own life.

Have you noticed that shopping has become our number one leisure-time activity, that adolescents hang out at malls? *Newsweek* reported that one of the hot items at the 1996 International Toy Fair in New York City a few weeks ago was "Melanie's Mall," collectable mall stores and kiosks, complete with a gold card for each tiny doll which may be purchased. "This isn't just a Mall, this is Melanie's whole world!" the promotional blurb proclaimed.

And here comes Paul in the name of his Lord Jesus, and out of his own new experience of life in Christ — "without love I am nothing." There is substance here we are learning. This is not empty rhetoric. This is the real thing. This is hard truth.

Victor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who survived Auschwitz and then later reflected on that experience and what it taught him about human life.

> "The more one forgets oneself — giving oneself to a cause or another person — the more human he/she is. Happiness is the side effect of living out the self-transcendence of existence. Once one has served a cause or is involved in loving another human being, happiness occurs by itself." [*The Unconscious God*, p. 77]

Frankl, and other Holocaust survivors, testified that love, the love of another person, but even more importantly love for another person, having another person to care about, worry about, was the source of life-giving strength.

If you are fortunate you have work that you love to do and which is, in turn, a source of life for you. The distinguished psychotherapist Abraham Maslow once quipped that "the business of self-actualization can best be carried out via commitment to an important job."

Someone once caught the late George Halas, coach of the Chicago Bears, at his desk in the middle of the night. "Why are you working so late, Mr. Halas?" he was asked. He replied, "It's only work if there is somewhere else you'd rather be."

If you are blessed you have work you love to do and which, in turn, is a source of life. And if you do not have work which you love, it is important to find something, some cause, some project, some activity which your work enables you to do and which does call love out of you and therefore becomes a source of life for you.

One who has thought a lot about the connection between love and life is Bernie S. Siegel, a surgeon who specializes in cancer and who has written about his work and his unique approach. Dr. Siegel works hard to get cancer patients to feel better about themselves because when they do, they live longer. The pattern which he has observed is that cancer victims often feel somehow unlovable and then unloved and then something happens, the capacity to love seems to diminish and they stop loving. The antidote? Dr. Siegel sounds like a preacher: unconditional love, strong, tough love with no strings attached, love that touches and holds tightly and says I am with you and will not let you go and nothing will stop me from loving you.

Siegel says the immediate message to the body is "live."

If you are blessed you have someone to love. Even more important than another person who loves you is someone, or something, some cause, that calls your love out of you and is, therefore, a source of life for you.

There are people all around us who have discovered that basic Christian secret:

- the mother who loves her children and who will not stop loving them, will never give up on them.

- the man who sits by the bedside of his wife descending into the darkness of Alzheimers, holding her hand when she no longer recognizes him, loving her still.

•the physician who works late into the night with her uninsured patient.

•the attorney who invests every Thursday night tutoring a youngster from Cabrini-Green.

•the friend who stays by the bedside of one dying with AIDS.

Several times a year I have occasion to visit briefly with a man I very much admire and respect. We serve on a board together. He is a retired economics professor and dean of one of our most distinguished business schools, the author of several very important textbooks, a distinguished scholar, much in demand as a speaker and consultant. He is unfailingly gracious, pleasant, always interesting and interested in what I am doing and how things are going in Chicago. He is in his mid-seventies, he is trim, vigorous, full of life. This past week I discovered the source of his vitality. When I met him again he introduced me to a woman whose hand he was holding. "I'd like you to meet my daughter, Laura," he said. Laura is middle-aged, significantly challenged physically and mentally. "Without love ... I am nothing."

The words were written originally for a church that had forgotten, for the moment at least, about the basic message, about the foolishness of the cross and the power of God in the vulnerability of love, had forgotten that the way to trust God and follow Jesus was to exhibit that same love in its own life. In the midst of all the handwringing about the decline of mainline churches in America, and all the frenzied effort to reverse the decline by becoming more market savvy, giving the consumers the religious product they want, I do hope we will remember that without love it doesn't amount to anything; that without selfless love that gives life away religion and the church sound like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. That's why, I believe, people turn away from religion and give up on church, because when it has no love it has nothing. The recovery of religion, I believe, happens when religion recovers the mandate to love. All the church growth strategy in the world will not make a difference if there is no love at the heart of it. And likewise, I have long suspected that churches that stop worrying about numbers and concentrate on living out the imperatives to love won't have anything to worry about.

Reynolds Price, Professor of English at Duke University and one of our finest working writers, lived through a harrowing and painful four-year battle with spinal cancer, which has left him in a wheelchair, but very much alive. referred to his ordeal and the fine book he wrote about it a year ago, *A Whole New Life.* His first novel after the episode is about a man, a professor of English, whose only son is dying of AIDS. One night they are talking, trying to connect after a period of estrangement. The father says:

> "If I've really seen anything at all in these years, and passed it on, it's just been this — the only thing that matters a whit in human life is using your mind and body, throttle-out as long as you last, to spark the gaps and hook you to people you need and can give to." [*A Whole New Life*]

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that you are loved by a God willing to suffer, willing to share your life and that nothing that can happen to you that will separate you from that life.

The Gospel is also an invitation to live by expressing that love in your own life.

So, do love. Love those you need. Love those you can give your love to. Tell them you love them. Go home today and identify them, call them on the phone. Just say it, "You are a source of life to me and I love you." And then show your love. Love a neighbor; love a neighbor you don't even like. Love a child. Love your country, your community, your church. Love God.

Opportunities come every day, every hour of every day. Opportunities to love, to give something of your life away and to discover in the process that Paul was absolutely right — it is the most excellent way of all.

Amen.